

Top Nixon Aides Are Hanging On

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H. R. Haldeman and John D. Ehrlichman, the two high-ranking White House assistants who have been implicated in the Watergate case, are fighting hard to retain their jobs, informed sources said yesterday.

The sources, including friends of the two men and other presidential aides, said Haldeman's and Ehrlichman's attitude has delayed President Nixon's decision on what steps he should take next to combat the scandal.

Several of Mr. Nixon's closest advisers, both inside and outside the White House, have strongly urged him in recent days to conduct a thorough housecleaning of his staff, without waiting to see which of his aides, if any, will be indicted by the Watergate grand jury or ultimately convicted.

FALL

"A lot of us want him to let the chips fall where they may," said one White House official who appears to have retained the President's confidence through all the disclosures of the last two weeks. "The problem is that some of the chips don't want to fall."

He indicated that he was referring to Haldeman and Ehrlichman.

Secretary of State William P. Rogers is reported to have urged Mr. Nixon, during a cruise on the Potomac River last week aboard the presidential yacht Sequoia, to move quickly and decisively. George Bush, chairman of the Republican National Committee, sent similar word to Mr. Nixon Thursday.

CHOICES

But any housecleaning would almost certainly involve Haldeman and Ehrlichman, and both of them are arguing that Mr. Nixon should do nothing in their cases unless one or the other, or both, are indicted. Mr. Nixon is committed publicly

to suspend aides if they are indicted.

As sketched by one intimate, the President has three basic choices: clean house now; wait and see what the grand jury does, then decide; decide now to retain Haldeman and Ehrlichman no matter what the consequences, unless they are indicted.

Haldeman, the President's chief of staff, is suspected of involvement in both the planning and subsequent coverup of the break-in at the Democratic National Committee headquarters; Ehrlichman, the chief domestic adviser, has been implicated only in the cover-up.

If Mr. Nixon decided to retain the two men, he would leave himself open to accusations, as one Republican senator said, that "he still hasn't come completely clean."

A former party chairman, Senator Robert Dole of Kansas, said publicly yesterday what many Republican professionals and members of Congress have been saying privately.

Dole called for the immediate resignation of Haldeman and Ehrlichman and said that "if they have any dedication and loyalty to the President, they can show it by resigning."

"Right now the credibility of the administration is zero," he added.

In an apparent attempt to gauge the depth of such feeling, Nixon associates have begun to sound out opinion leaders, seeking their judgment as to probable public reaction to the retention of the two high-ranking officials.

One White House source said that the meetings of John J. Wilson, the lawyer retained by Haldeman and Ehrlichman, with the President and with the prosecutor in the Watergate case are part of an effort to find a way for Haldeman and Ehrlichman to avoid indictment if possible.

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